

FROM THE MEANING OF LIFE TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE

“Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning, -then it can be put back into circulation.”
-Wittgenstein, 1940¹

I. Some Metatheory

A traditional view of the meaning of life was that life has meaning when it is lived in the service of some greater cause. Call this Teleologism. According to this view, the meaning of life is the purpose of life, and each person has a certain role to play in the achievement of that purpose. Living a meaningful life is fulfilling that role, whether it be converting the heathens, or washing the dishes of those who convert the heathens.

In recent centuries, this traditional view has fallen into disrepute. To many it has seemed increasingly doubtful that there is some greater purpose ordained for us. And even if there were some greater purpose ordained for us, it would not follow that our lives were made meaningful by carrying it out. Suppose it turned out that we were created by a bored and somewhat perverse deity, purely for her own amusement. Our ordained purpose is to do embarrassing things--a role we seem well designed to carry out. Who would wish to say that fulfilling this ordained role was meaningful?

So, for various reasons, we have come to think that there is no such thing as the meaning of life in this traditional sense. And this, in turn, has provoked various reactions. One reaction is Nihilism--the view that life is

meaningless, or has no meaning whatever. Another reaction is that, while life has no objective meaning, it is possible to inject meaning into one's life oneself, by, for example, committing oneself to some project. This view I will call Existentialism. According to Existentialism, some lives may have meaning, but only in the subjective sense that they are thought to have meaning. As Hamlet is made to say, "thinking makes it so."

I find both of these reactions to Teleologism just as unacceptable as Teleologism itself. I agree with the Nihilist that thinking cannot make it so, yet I remain convinced that it can be so: Lives can have meaning in some objective sense. Rather than argue against these reactions,² I will try to explain how lives can have some sort of objective meaning without falling into Teleologism. I will call my view Quasi-Objectivism. This view about the sense in which lives can be meaningful has three characteristics:

First, it is *Pluralistic*. Quite various kinds of lives should be capable of being meaningful. And, furthermore, lives can be meaningful in virtue of quite various kinds of things. They need not all be meaningful by virtue of advancing some single purpose. Thus, it might be better to speak of the meanings of lives, rather than the meaning of life.

Second, it is *Non-Voluntaristic*. Meaningfulness is not just a matter of feeling, or deciding, or believing that one's life does, or does not, have meaning. It is not a matter of volition, except insofar as one might purposely change one's life so that it becomes meaningful, or meaningless. Believing

one's life is meaningful is related to its being meaningful about as much as believing one's body is healthy is related to its being healthy.

Third, it is *Non-Platonic*. By this I mean that meaningfulness is not built into the very nature of things, as a Platonic Form is. Rather, meaningfulness arises because of the human condition--because we are the kinds of beings we are, with the kinds of concerns we have. If we were more like the social insects, meaningfulness might consist in something quite different, or perhaps in nothing at all.

In developing this notion of the meaningfulness of lives, I have been helped by considering the notion of the meaningfulness of language. The analogy is by no means complete, but it is instructive. It shows, I think, how objective meaningfulness is possible:

Obviously, there is not some one meaning that all language has. But this leads no one to Nihilism about the meaning of language. Do words have meanings just because we give them those meanings? This question is not quite so easy to answer. Of course the meaning of a word is not something built into the very nature of things, right from the start. No one is a Platonist about the meanings of words. Words have meanings in virtue of their roles in human communication. If humans communicated differently, or not at all, words would have different, or no, meanings.

Since the meanings of words arise because of human practices, perhaps those meanings are decided upon or chosen by the particular individuals who use the words. This Existentialist view is voiced by Humpty

Dumpty in a conversation with Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (Chapter VI):

"There are 364 days when you might get un-birthday presents."

"Certainly," said Alice.

"And only one for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't--till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knockdown argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be the master--that's all."

When Humpty Dumpty explained that by "glory" he meant "a nice knockdown argument," it would have been well for Alice to ask what he meant by *that*, and the Existentialist Humpty Dumpty would have been set off on an infinite regress. But, even so, the exchange makes clear the implausibility of the view that meaning is given to words solely by intent or choice.³

In what sense, then, do words have meanings? Their meanings arise neither from the nature of things, nor from individual decision. A word can have a meaning of which I am unaware, or lack a meaning when I think it has one, or have a different meaning from what I thought it had. Words have meaning in what I would call a quasi-objective sense.

Similarly, if lives can be meaningful in a quasi-objective sense, then someone's life can have meaning even if the person thinks it is meaningless, or it can be meaningless even if the person thinks it is meaningful or tries to inject meaning into it. The analogy with word meaning is supposed to show that quasi-objectivity is an independently plausible philosophical position to take concerning the sense in which something may be meaningful.

Those are the similarities I think we can discern from the comparison of the meanings of lives and words. But the differences turn out to be just as instructive as the similarities. Saying that a word has meaning is not the same as saying what the meaning of that word is. If the word is in a language I cannot understand, I may be able to do the former but not the latter. But if I do understand the language, I can go on to explain or indicate the meaning of the word in question.

But if I say that a life has meaning, it is not so obvious how, or whether, I can go on to say what the meaning of that life is. Just what would constitute an answer to that question? Consider a meaningful life, such as that of Gandhi. Gandhi was greatly concerned with, and sought after, non-violence in his life. But it is rather odd to say that Gandhi's life *meant* non-

violence. If a word is meaningful, there is generally something that it means. But if a life is meaningful, it is not so clear that there is something that it means. The closest we can come to a meaning here is some overriding concern. But that may not be present in all meaningful lives, and, in any case, this threatens to warp our language to save an analogy.

It may just be that lives can have meaning or be meaningful without having meanings. And if this is so, it would explain why it is so hard to answer, or even contemplate, the question “what is the meaning of life?” This asks us to say what the meaning is. Yet, while a life can have meaning, or be meaningful, it may be that there is no such thing as its meaning.⁴

This is not as odd as it sounds. A man may have dignity or be dignified, and yet we may be quite unable to say what his dignity is (though we could, perhaps, say what it consists in). The question “what is the dignity of that man?” is unanswerable because it is a misguided question. People can have dignity without there being such a thing as what their dignity is.⁵

The question “what is the meaning of life?” seems unanswerably profound. But it is unanswerable because it is a misguided question, and therefore it is not profound.⁶ It should be replaced, to avoid confusion, by another question, which may or may not be profound, but is at least answerable: “What kinds of lives have meaning?” (or “what does the meaningfulness of a life consist in?”).

II. A Normative Theory

The Nihilist will answer this question by saying that no kinds of lives have meaning. The Existentialist will answer that while no lives have objective meaning, some have subjective meaning--namely, those that attempt to inject meaning through a subjective commitment. I will propose an alternative answer that is not skeptical. Then I will test its adequacy by applying it to certain sample lives to explain their meaningfulness, or lack thereof.

My theory consists of the following three normative conditions for a meaningful life:

1) *Enough activities must be engaged in for their own sake, or as ends in themselves.* Not all activities need (or could) be of this character, but some should be, at least some of the time. A meaningful life cannot be devoted solely to promoting some external end, if the subject does not value some of that promotion for its own sake. To draw on Kant's terminology, the subject of a meaningful life must not be a means only, but also, at least sometimes, be an end in herself or himself. It is common to take enjoyment in an activity as a sign that the activity is valued for its own sake. So a meaningful life will, other things being equal, include some joy.⁷

2) *The life must make enough contribution to something outside of itself.* Frege famously claimed that "it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning."⁸ I would extend this claim to the meaning of lives. The subject of a meaningful life cannot be wholly self-centered, but

must engage in some projects or pursue some values that lead outside of himself or herself. This outward direction might be the perfection of a valuable skill, or the growth of human knowledge, or the well-being of others, or even, to encompass Teleologism, the purposes of a transcendent being. In some sense the meaningful life is not isolated. It may, indeed, be lived in physical isolation, as in the case of someone like John Muir, but it is not lived wholly for its own sake.

3) *The life must have enough intentional structure.* A life that is a random series of events is as unlikely to be meaningful as is a random string of letters. Yet a life that is completely structured in all of its details is fit to be lived by a robot, but not by a human being. There must be space for spontaneity and creativity. The structure should at least partly govern the activities that satisfy the first two normative conditions, for they are central aspects of a life. The structure must be intentional in the sense of being self-imposed. Only in this way will the person be subjectively committed to the structure of his or her life. Such a subjective commitment to the over-all structure of one's life is not a sufficient condition for meaningfulness, as the Existentialist holds, but it is necessary. This condition entails that the subject of a meaningful life be autonomous. But we must allow that in some cases one can autonomously give up control over the intentional structure of one's life, as in the case of a nun or a monk. And perhaps even involuntary slaves can satisfy condition (3) if they are able to create space within their lives for themselves, as indeed many North American slaves did.

Conditions (1) and (3) mark the difference between a meaningful life and a merely worthwhile or valuable life. Lives are valuable or worthwhile in consequence of their effects beyond themselves, from a third-person perspective. But meaningfulness involves a first-person perspective from which the role and experience of the agent is important. Condition (2) marks the difference between a meaningful life and a merely satisfying life. Lives are satisfying when they are experienced as such from an internal point of view. But meaningfulness involves an external significance that goes beyond satisfaction.

I claim that each of these three conditions is necessary, and jointly they are sufficient, for a life to be meaningful.⁹ They are admittedly *quite* vague as to how much there must be in a life of structure, activities that are ends in themselves, and activities that contribute to something external. Certainly there must be a non-trivial amount of these.¹⁰ Vagueness here may be desirable as well as unavoidable. What is considered “enough” may also vary from life to life, or culture to culture. My main concern is to isolate the *dimensions* on which the meaningfulness of lives is to be assessed.¹¹ I am not providing any sort of automatic procedure for such assessment.

III. Some Applications

The conditions have the rather welcome consequence that many people’s lives can be meaningful. The standard need not be so high as to be achievable only by a few,¹² nor so low as to be satisfied by everyone.

I propose to test the conditions by considering some sorts of lives that seem to me to be meaningless, and seeing whether my conditions can explain why they are meaningless.¹³

A) A servile wife or mother who does everything for the sake of her husband or children. She gets no joy from her life, except perhaps some vicarious pleasure from the achievements of her family. This woman may fail to satisfy condition (1).¹⁴

B) The surfer who pursues a life of drugs, sex, and pleasure. This person presumably does try to perfect certain skills, such as surfing and rolling joints, but they are not likely to be ones of any real value. It is also likely that this person's life is quite randomly pursued--bouncing from one bed or pleasure to the next with no plan in mind. This person may fail to satisfy condition (2), and also possibly condition (3).

Do professional athletes fare any better on condition (2)? Perhaps only insofar as their skills have entertainment value. This suggests a respect in which relativism infects the notion of meaningfulness.

C) The child of a doctor who goes through college, medical school, and into practice without giving a thought to whether this is the life to live. This kind of person fails to satisfy condition (3), for the life-plan is not self-imposed. As Socrates rather harshly proclaimed: "the unexamined life is not worth living for a man."

What about the unreflective peasant? In many times and cultures, one's options in life are so severely limited that it is better not to reflect on

what is not possible for oneself.¹⁵ In such cultures, condition (3) might be an inappropriate condition for meaningfulness, or meaningfulness might be a meaningless concept.

D) The person who dies at a tragically early age. Such a person may have not yet had time to live a meaningful life, for a meaningful life takes time to live. A child will hardly have had a chance to satisfy condition (2). A particularly industrious student may not have taken time to satisfy condition (1), if the student was obsessively future-oriented. Such people might well have lived a meaningful life if given more time.

It seems that people can also live to a tragically old age--that is, outlive their previously meaningful life. One can lose the capacities that were crucial to the meaningfulness of the life one has, so far, lived. Or one can retain the capacities, but live beyond the completion of the life project that gave one's life meaning, and be unsure how to carry on, or begin anew.

For obvious reasons, people think of their lives in terms of a series of stages of certain durations, with a total length of seven or eight decades.¹⁶ This self-conception is crucial in the organization of a meaningful life. When the length of one's life diverges from one's conception of it, one's life plan will not fit it neatly, unless the plan happens to be extremely elastic, or one is good at improvising. Since medical technology has improved more quickly than self-conceptions or life plans can change, meaningfulness has suffered. The immediate problem is that society is only starting to allow for a rethinking of the pace of the life plan (by, e.g., not insisting on retirement at

65), and people do not yet have any clear idea how to shift into a new life plan after retirement that is realistic so far as longevity is concerned. With no clear idea of whether to expect a life of five more months or 30 more years, it is easy to ignore long-term possibilities and focus on short-term, but eventually meaningless, activities. (One might compare the post-Presidential life of Jimmy Carter with those of other ex-Presidents.)

This raises an interesting Aristotelian issue. What shall we say of a life that would have been meaningful if it had ended at age 75, but drags on another two decades which are, considered in themselves, meaningless? Must we, following Solon, see the end of life before pronouncing on its meaningfulness?¹⁷ Or is a meaningful life like a valid argument--no matter how much you add on to it, it remains valid (or meaningful)? If my three conditions are truly jointly sufficient, then meaningfulness is more like validity (the extra years being like superfluous premises). But perhaps, since lives are temporally extended as logical arguments are not, the distribution of meaningfulness through time is crucial. Here are some possible views: A life is meaningful if all of its parts are meaningful.¹⁸ A life is meaningful if any (combination) of its parts is meaningful (the rest of the time we rest on our laurels). Or, finally, meaningfulness only applies to lives as wholes.

The last view, while simplifying the issues, seems quite implausible, since we can counterfactually apply the notion to (sufficiently long) initial segments of lives. Yet the first two views may imply a questionable sort of atomism about meaningfulness. Could a meaningful life be built up out of a

series of parts, each of which, considered in itself, is meaningless? This would be so if conditions (1) and (2) were only satisfied by different parts. Could one's life be made meaningful by events that happen only after one's death? Perhaps condition (2) is satisfied by the posthumous success of some project that seemed hopeless or even pointless during the life. Could certain (presumably later) parts of a life make other (earlier) parts meaningless that would have been called meaningful if considered simply in their own right? And, more ironically, could two parts of a life do this to each other? This might be like a person who acted on certain moral principles on even days of the month, and other, incompatible, moral principles on odd days.¹⁹ While there may be nothing objectionable about either set of principles, there is something objectionable about their coexistence in a single moral agent.²⁰ Perhaps a life lived in pursuit of incompatible purposes would have this self-defeating character. While enriching themselves, Marx thought capitalists were also digging their own graves through the exploitation of the working class.

E) One who has suffered great disillusionment through loss of a loved one, or failure to achieve some important goal. Such a person tends to become alienated from the structure of his or her life, and so may fail to satisfy condition (3). To this person, life has lost all meaning. But it is important to see that meaningfulness is not *necessarily* threatened by a great loss or failure. A person may intentionally adjust the structure of life to

accommodate the great change, and escape the sense of meaninglessness through reorientation.

In fact, however, people do not often lead single-minded lives, the meaningfulness of which hinges on the achievement of some single goal, or focuses on some single other person. Our lives tend to be much more layered, or web-like. This layering makes good sense from the point of view of meaning: It serves to protect meaning against contingency. Failure in one realm need not disrupt the structure of the whole life. Of course, no amount of layering can guarantee protection against alienating disruption. For some, loss or acquisition of belief in God might have this effect.

Aristotle tried to describe a life of *eudaimonia* that was as insulated as possible from the dangers of contingency. This was his life of contemplation.²¹ It was not described in terms of the achievement of any goal, and it was not dependent on interaction with other people. Ironically, it was single-minded, and thus subject to contingency nevertheless--viz., the loss of one's highest rational faculties (through, for example, head injury or Alzheimer's Disease). Perhaps, for Aristotle, this would be tantamount to the death of the person, in which case no room is left for a tragic gap to open up between life and fulfillment.^{21a}

Layering of one's life concerns, rather than single-mindedness, has the advantage of allowing one to examine one's life concerns objectively and comfortably, without the immediate risk of alienation from one's life. As long as one has a few, or a number, of life concerns, one can take some of them for

granted, while testing one or a few others. If a person's identity is invested in a single life concern, then critical examination of that concern feels like personal attack. Sophocles seems to be investigating this issue in *Antigone*. Antigone is thoroughly single-minded and unwilling to reexamine the nature of her commitment to her dead brother. Creon, through the destruction of his family, comes to have (or learns to appreciate) a layering of concerns that is more traditional.

Of course, layering of concerns does not guarantee the ability to examine one's concerns objectively. It all depends on how flexible is one's investment of identity in one's concerns. (Socrates found the Athenians to be rather inflexible in this regard.)

F) Marx's alienated proletarian, who produces only for wages to reproduce his own existence. Life is consumed by work, but work is done only for the sake of life.²² The wage-laborer is in a vicious circle in which life cannot be seen as being lived for its own sake, and so work cannot be seen as contributing to anything important. Thus, the wage-laborer fails to satisfy condition (1), and will not believe that condition (2) is satisfied. Furthermore, his life is lived out of necessity and not choice, and thus probably fails to satisfy condition (3). The belief that condition (2) is not satisfied will tend to produce alienation from the structure of the life and exacerbate the problem with condition (3).

This vicious circle is broken, according to Marx, by the abolition of private property. Production is freely undertaken for the sake of satisfying

needs of others. Thus the communist worker (knowingly) satisfies condition (2) by contributing to something beyond herself, and condition (3) by doing this freely. Condition (1) is satisfied either by treating production as done also for its own sake, or else by the activities undertaken outside of work that contribute to the all-round development of the individual.²³

If these six kinds of cases, and others like them, seem reasonably well explained, then that is some grounds for thinking my conditions are correct.

IV. Some Reflections

I want to end by raising some of the many issues that my account of meaning provokes.

I have mentioned some elements of relativity in the satisfaction of the conditions for meaning. Without stopping to discuss the issue of moral relativism, I think that “meaningful” is relative in a way that “morally right” is not. (Or I could say “meaningful” is more relative than “morally right”.) I do not think there can be a set of conditions for meaningfulness that could apply to all cultures. The notion of meaningfulness, as I have explicated it, presupposes a degree of economic affluence and a degree of psychological autonomy that seems less than common in the broad sweep of human history and even in the contemporary world.²⁴ Does my theory at least imply that societies should strive to make their members sufficiently affluent and autonomous that they can lead (or fail to lead) meaningful lives? I don’t

think so, any more than theories about what is fashionable imply that societies should strive to make their members susceptible to fashion trends.

But my theory should, I think, show why people in candidate societies would wish to lead meaningful lives. “Meaningfulness” is a normative concept in the right circumstances, and, to people in those circumstances, it should be something inherently attractive. My normative conditions might be summarized by saying that you live a meaningful life when you enjoy your life, it makes a difference, and you believe in it. This does seem inherently attractive.²⁵ Leading a meaningful life is an expression of our humanness. Those who (can but) do not want to lead a meaningful life show a real lack as human beings.

To what extent are moral considerations relevant to the assessment of the meaningfulness of someone’s life? Did Hitler, for example, lead a meaningful life? The difficulty comes in determining exactly what condition (2) is, and whether it is satisfied. Hitler certainly contributed to something beyond himself, and he may, at times, have thought of this contribution as a good one. Must a meaningful life make a good or positive contribution? I am not inclined to think so. We should try to keep moral assessment separate from assessments of meaningfulness. On the other hand, my condemnation of the surfer’s life as meaningless involved the claim that surfing is not a valuable skill, and here I may be importing an element of moral assessment. Perhaps the criticism of the surfer should be that his skill is not significant, if

that can be distinguished from its not being valuable. So, I am unsure of the extent to which moral assessment can be excluded from condition (2).

Condition (2) also encounters a further difficulty. What if someone attempts to fulfill condition (2)--contributing to something beyond herself--but fails? For example, suppose she devoted her whole life to discovering a cure for AIDS. Many worthwhile projects are fallible ones, and there are degrees of fallibility. Of course, some projects are outlandish, while others are reasonable. Is it enough reasonably to intend and try to fulfill condition (2), or must the attempt be crowned with some degree of success (even posthumously)? I have the Kantian intuition that meaningfulness should not be a matter of luck, so we should be satisfied with a reasonable attempt. But I am uncertain of this.

The inverse of this issue is serendipity. Can a meaningless life become meaningful through accidental fulfillment of condition (2)? Suppose the surfer of case (B) gives up drugs for purely personal reasons--he stops enjoying them, or he can't afford them, and he luckily does not have an addictive personality. Some younger admiring surfers notice this, though without learning of his reasons, and are moved to give up drugs too. Can this make his life meaningful? Not, I think, by itself. In my discussion of condition (3), I suggested that the life's intentional structure should (at least partly) govern the activities that fulfill the other conditions. This is not true of the surfer, yet. But if, upon discovering his influence on others, he sees this as an influence he wants to have, and he then incorporates this into the

intentional structure of his life, then we can say that his life has become meaningful.

Is there a tension between the quasi-objectivity that I ascribe to meaningfulness, and condition (3)? According to quasi-objectivity, a belief that life is meaningful is not a necessary condition for its being meaningful (nor is it sufficient). But condition (3) requires subjective commitment to the structure of one's life. Does such a commitment entail belief in meaningfulness? Does belief in meaninglessness entail alienation from (the structure of) one's life? The answer to the first question seems to be "no", since one needn't be concerned about the notion of meaningfulness at all. One does not have to be concerned about meaningfulness per se to lead a meaningful life. The answer to the second question would seem to be that it depends on how much one cares about meaningfulness. If one does care, then its apparent lack would be alienating, as it was to Tolstoy.²⁶ To think one's own life has lost meaning is at least a step toward its having lost meaning. (But, to consider the medical analogue, could someone die of hypochondria?) If one believes one is leading a meaningless life, but does not care about its meaningfulness, then one's belief will not necessarily be alienating, and so one may, nevertheless, lead a meaningful life. Thus, beliefs about meaningfulness have no necessary connection with the satisfaction of condition (3).

“What is the meaning of life?” This question sounds profound but has no answer. “What kinds of lives are meaningful?” This sounds less profound, but it may at least have an answer along the lines I have suggested. It is a noteworthy consequence of the account I have offered that physicalism is consistent with the possibility of a meaningful life. There is no need to postulate a God, or God-given purposes, nor is there any need to postulate an immortal soul with an after-life.²⁷ Some purposes are worthy, whether God ordains them for us or not. And although death may cut short a life before it becomes meaningful, it does not necessarily do so.²⁸

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NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Chicago, 1980, p. 39.
2. For a thorough evaluation of a variety of nihilistic and non-objective accounts of the meaning of life, see R. Sylvan and N. Griffin, "Unravelling the Meanings of Life?" *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Autumn, 1986.
3. Of course there is stipulative definition, but it is necessarily derivative.

A similar attempt at linguistic existentialism is made by Rabbit in A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, VII. In Which Kanga and Baby Roo Come to the Forest, and Piglet Has a Bath:

"The best way," said Rabbit, "would be this. The best way would be to steal Baby Roo and hide him, and then when Kanga says, 'Where's Baby Roo?' we say, 'Aha!'"

"Aha!" said Pooh, practicing. "Aha! Aha! ... Of course," he went on, "we could say 'Aha!' even if we hadn't stolen Baby Roo."

"Pooh," said Rabbit kindly, "you haven't any brain."

"I know," said Pooh humbly.

"We say 'Aha!' so that Kanga knows that *we* know where Baby Roo is. 'Aha!' means 'We'll tell you where Baby Roo is, if you

promise to go away from the Forest and never come back.’ Now don’t talk while I think.”

Pooh went into a corner and tried saying “Aha!” in that sort of voice. Sometimes it seemed to him that it did mean what Rabbit said, and sometimes it seemed to him that it didn’t. “I suppose it’s just practice,” he thought. “I wonder if Kanga will have to practice to understand it.”

Cf. also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan, 1968, bottom paragraph on p. 18, and §§ 508-510 and 665.

4. This fact may explain some of Wittgenstein’s obscure thoughts in his *Notebooks: 1914-1916*, 2nd edition, Chicago, 1979. On 11 June, 1916 he reflects that the meaning of life does not lie in the world but outside of it. One might reason as follows: We cannot say what the meaning of life is, so it cannot lie in the world. So if, or since, there is a meaning of life, it must lie outside the world. My point is that it is misleading to think of life’s meaning in an entitative fashion at all. We needn’t put life’s meaning anywhere, either within or without the world.

Perhaps Wittgenstein’s mysticism about meaning and values derives from the combination of three positions: He is not skeptical about these things; he thinks of them entitatively; and he realizes that nothing entitative in the world corresponds to them. Fourteen years later (*The Blue and Brown*

Books, Harper & Row, 1965, p. 1), while articulating his new thoughts on the meanings of words, Wittgenstein makes just the right remark:

The question... “What is meaning?” ...produce[s] in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can’t point to anything...and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for something that corresponds to it.)

5. Bob Dylan plays with the entitative conception of dignity in his recent song “Dignity.”

6. Cf. J.L. Austin’s diatribe against the phrase “the meaning of a word,” in “The Meaning of a Word,” *Philosophical Papers*, 2nd edition, Oxford, 1970.

7. Enjoyment is commonly a sign of valuing something for its own sake, but it is not a necessary part of it. Joy and satisfaction are all-things-considered mental states. The joy one would have gotten from some activity valued for its own sake may always be overwhelmed by anguish from another source, without this preventing the activity from being valued for its own sake.

Perhaps Vincent van Gogh’s life is a good illustration of this.

This raises the question whether the condition necessary for meaningfulness is the activity which is valued for its own sake, or the joy which such activity normally produces. Reflection on the analogous case of

pleasure machines suggests that it is the activity and not the joy.

Nevertheless, if anguish is too great, it may produce alienation from the structure of one's life and undercut condition (3) *infra*.

8. Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Blackwell, 1980, p. 73; and cf. pp. X & 116.

9. These three conditions are not psychological conditions for finding one's life to be meaningful, but normative conditions for assessing whether a life is meaningful. Psychological conditions are not wholly irrelevant to the normative question, however, insofar as finding one's life to be meaningless may lead to a situation in which one's life is normatively meaningless.

Though I take the notion of meaningfulness to apply paradigmatically to individual human lives, the conditions do not entail this limitation. The lives of any creatures with sufficient intentionality would be candidates. And social groups with sufficient unity of purpose might also be candidates.

10. "For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 7, 1098a18-19). The question of how much is enough is one that I will not address, though I acknowledge its importance. Its importance is pressed by Lawrence C. Becker, "The Neglect of Virtue," *Ethics*, January, 1975, Section 2.

11. Sylvan and Griffin, in their positive account, acknowledge only the second of these three normative conditions. Thus, I find their account seriously incomplete. An account that is limited to the second condition tells us about what makes a life valuable or significant, but it does not capture the subjective perspective on one's own life which I believe is crucial to an understanding of the meaningfulness of life.

12. Perhaps the standards are set too high by the author of *Ecclesiastes* (1:1): "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity!"

13. Thus, I endorse the justificatory method of reflective equilibrium. This has its roots in Aristotle's method of doing moral philosophy. For an account of this, see Terence H. Irwin, "Aristotle's Methods of Ethics," in *Studies in Aristotle*, ed., D. O'Meara, Catholic University Press, 1981. I do not think that a theory of meaningfulness can be radically revisionary of our usual judgements of meaningfulness.

14. In this and some other cases I present extreme and oversimplified lives. No lives are actually like these, but they serve to highlight various normative failures.

15. I have elaborated this point in Section III of my paper “The Good Old Days,” in *Technological Transformation: Contextual and Conceptual Implications*, eds., E. Byrne and J. Pitt, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.

16. Cf. “...our life lasts for seventy years, eighty with good health...” (*Psalms* 90:10); and “...when their age has already run its course toward the seventieth year” (Aristotle, *Politics* 1335a35). Of course this is contingent on human physiology and on technological advances in health care.

The ante-diluvian patriarchs apparently enjoyed (or endured) life-spans of quite a different order from ours, climaxing with Methuselah’s whopping 969 years (*Genesis* 5:1 - 6:4). Moses lived to a mere 120, but, fortunately and crucially, “his eye undimmed, his vigor unimpaired” (*Deuteronomy* 34:7). Medical technology may be heading us back in that direction, though we can only hope that our souls will keep up with our bodies. 342 year old E[milia] M[arty], in Karel Capek’s play “The Makropulos Case,” laments: “One cannot stand it. For 100, 130 years, one can go on. But then...and then one’s soul dies.”

17. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 9-11 (1100a3-1101b8). Cf. also the closing line of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*: “Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain”; and Hecabe’s lament (509-519) in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*: “Of all who walk in bliss call not one happy yet, until the man is dead.”

18. The notion of “parts” of a life is not transparent. One way to spell it out might be to take a part as the smallest period of a life that could be considered meaningful. Another might be to understand it in terms of “stages of life” from developmental psychology. I hope that nothing much in this paper depends on such an explication.

19. The kind of case I am imagining needs to be one in which it is implausible to explain it as a genuine change of mind. Consider the life of St. Paul who was Saul. Presumably Paul’s activities do not undercut Saul’s in an ironic way. There is no more tension here than there would be if Paul and Saul were literally two different people.

20. This is the requirement of the supervenience of moral judgements, as it has been explicated by R.M. Hare, in, for example, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford, 1952.

21. The life is described in *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 6-9. Whether or not this life is thoroughly single-minded, and so incompatible with the sort of life described in Book I, is a matter of considerable scholarly controversy. For an interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as single-minded, see John Cooper, Chapter III of *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, Harvard, 1975. For an ideal life that is uncontroversially single-minded and maximally insulated

from contingency, see the views of Diotima and Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*.

21a. Aristotle is unwilling to admit that contemplation itself could suffer from injury or old age, but he does confess that it can be undermined by deterioration of the underlying physical processes: "...old age is not due to the soul's being affected in a certain way, but to this happening to that which the soul is in, as is the case in drunkenness and disease. Thus thought and contemplation decay because something else within is destroyed, while thought is in itself unaffected" (*De Anima* I, 4: 408b22-25). This strikes me as a distinction without a difference. In either case the result is the same--defective thought.

22. Many contemporary white-, as well as blue-, collar workers, if they thought about it, might see themselves in this picture.

23. Exactly how Marx thinks alienation will be eliminated in a communist society is a matter of scholarly controversy. In "Marx's Realms of 'Freedom' and 'Necessity,'" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, December, 1986, I have argued that work will itself be non-alienating, according to Marx, rather than the alienation of work being balanced off by fulfilling activities outside of work.

24. The idea that meaningfulness cannot arise as an issue in some cultures or circumstances, is related to the notion, shared by Hume, Rawls, Mackie, and others, that justice cannot arise as an issue except where resources are present but scarce, and sympathy is possible but limited.

25. I am not endorsing internalism about judgements of meaningfulness. No doubt some, such as alienated teenagers and the severely depressed, can understand the notion of a meaningful life and reject it.

26. See Tolstoy's "My Confession."

27. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6 (1096b4): "...nor will it [the Form of the Good] be any more good for being eternal; that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day."

28. Parts of this paper have been presented to audiences at University of California at San Diego, College of William and Mary, Virginia Tech, and West Virginia University. I have benefited from their many probing questions and illuminating suggestions.